

Short Story  
Janice Daugharty  
Rt. 1  
Stockton, Ga. 31649  
912 242-5917  
April 24, 1986

"The Great Gulf"

She stood, pallid face pressed into the window pane with white hair bordering three others like scalloped, yellowing lace, watching for them: the scraggly youths who might appear in weird attires symbolic of the Fifty's, or the Sixty's, or the Seventy's in 1985. But regardless, she knew they would straggle across the old oak's paisley evening shadow, along the sidewalk that connected the side-by-side Colonial houses relinquished by time to budding adults with a buck and a dream.

And they came in pairs of two's and pods of three, black and white combined, masculine and feminine and combinations thereof, lugging totes and satchels, wearing wigs and hippie headbands, and some in leotards as buff and slick as oiled skin.

They came on time as if not to disappoint her, but never glanced from their esoteric world at the nose pressed into the window like a remaining smudge of canned Christmas snow.

She stepped away and clucked, scuttling lamely to the front door to check the lock, peering a prolonged moment through the peephole to see them gather on the

crescent shaped porch and scatter like pot plants along the edges.

The fair and lithe blonde girl in buff leotards rose and executed an airy pirouette, concluding in a porcelain doll arabesque. The black boy joined her for a sprightly finale across the porch to a soundless rendition by Bach.

At the end, with bare feet dangling on the fragile goblets of butter daffodils that had always sprouted with spring, another girl in a headband and an earring inscribed with PEACE recited from a book dramatically extended against the evening sun, a Shakespearean soliloquy which a mocking bird mimicked.

Two, whose gender was undiscernible even to them-and especially even to them whose identity was obscured by the blinds of youth, sat on a curve of the crescent porch in the shade of a frilly Crepe Myrtle tree and shared a smoke, ducking heads together for the exchange, and looking at the house across the street which contained the woman.

She stepped back and smoothed her white apron, exclaiming to herself as there was no one else to whom she could exclaim.

"It'll be dark soon. And this time I'm calling. They ain't no sense in putting it off til they break in my house. They got dope in that house, shore as I'm standing here, and doing no tellings what," she said, as she rearranged the family picture on the crocheted doily of the Victorian table.

The children were grown and gone. Her husband was in the cemetary two blocks away where she had walked two sunny mornings a week for the past two years bearing roses clipped from her garden and wrapped in newspaper. On rainy days she sewed at her treadle sewing machine and watched television soap operas and game shows.

She shuffled to the kitchen and removed the bowl of noodle soup from the refrigerator, sloshing it with tremoring hands to the stove where it scraped and skittered leaving dark web streaks like the veins on top of her hands.

From the pot to the soupbowl, the soup was placed on a tray that she labored beneath enroute to the living room which reeked of preservation like a prom corsage pressed between the leaves of a seldom opened book. The final rays of sunset cast stenciled lacy patterns on the floor through the sheer curtains of the long windows.

She placed the tray on the end of the coffee table, uprighting a toppled vase, and drew the shades against the violent rays, moving on in the dusk to touch the switch on the television set which washed the stale room in white candescence.

The news commentator made contact with her eyes as she sipped her soup from the spoon. He told her of all the sated and unsated passions, of the solved and unsolved crimes of the universe, omitting nothing, no continent, no connection with her world, VALDOSTA, GEORGIA,

When he finished his personal message, his somber face faded to a spinning blue and gray globe of the world that receded to a familiar and decisive musical orchestration befitting the theme.

After she had washed and dried her bowl and spoon and returned them to their usual places, she turned off the kitchen light and returned to the living room where she surreptitiously lifted the parchment shade to peer at the house occupied by the mysterious youths across the street.

The curtainless window on the first floor glowed with candlelight pink and hazy as a mist at sunset.

Nude bodies flitted past like moths, fluttering, darting,

halting to music which rose and fell to the fluttering and darting and halting. It stopped. The nude bodies bounced to the window, a step away. Contorted legs spread like scissors and cut into the floor while the body above forced one down and then the other. The scissor legged girl moaned and pleaded and laughed in a lilting voice.

"I knew it! I knew it!" exclaimed the woman.

And above, on the second floor, the harsh illumination of the dangling bare bulb, strobed by swirling bugs, revealed a boy, splay-kneed, effeminate, and intent, at a sewing machine. He stood and placed the floral purple skirt at his waist, held it away and examined it, then slipped it on over his gray sweat shorts. He spread the skirts and whirled to the music, grabbed a partner for an exaggerated waltz as the tawny boy passed, and both laughed as they glided onto the balcony haloed by the white street light.

"Yes, Sirree! Yes, Sirree! I knowed it the first time I seen'em," she said.

A girl entered the room, doused the light and a flare consumed the darkness, waved, and the flicker of a candle replaced it, growing to a glow as she sat on the floor crosslegged with a book placed beneath the candle. She studied the opened book intensely, raised her dark head to a noble and profound attitude of concentration. And

there she became a statue at peace in the bronze cast of the candle.

"Devil worshipping. Lord, help me!" said the woman.

Below, the music started again, on the upswing, and the leaping and bounding of the nude bodies began, fast and wild and proliferate, from wall to wall, into the center, swirling and spinning faster and faster at an exillering pace until they were spent. And they collapsed on the floor like woundndown dolls with rubbery legs and arms crisscrossed and slack faces marred with dark cavities for eyes.

"I ain't putting it off another minute. I ain't waiting til they get doped up and break in and jump me," the woman said, dropping the shade which rattled and lay behind the billowing curtain.

She made the call and lowered the volume on the television set - not too much because she might miss Lawerence Welk. Then she returned to her spying place to wait.

Soon she saw the black and white squad car crawling like a beetle under the street lights and stop in front of the house. Two officers emerged, tugged at their caps and sauntered to the front door.

They knocked. They knocked again, harder, but no one came to the open door. They shrugged their shoulders in harmony and entered.

She watched them enter the candlelit room downstairs, standing across from the two nude youths in the absence of music. The youths' chest were rising and falling to the beat upstairs. They shrugged their shoulders at the crossarmed officers, making circular motions with their hands and resumed their contortionist exhibition as the police mounted the stairs.

"Well, I'll be," said the woman, looking up.

She saw one of the officers lightly tap the bronzed shoulder of the meditative girl. She looked up and strained for comprehension, then wandered easily to the stereo to lower the volume.

She returned to the candle, and the two boys waltzed through and halted before the officers, one chagrined, the other giggling and gesturing with his hands and head. The officers wrapped themselves in their arms again, perused the room at a rotation of their heads, and nodded affirmatively to the three as they approached the stairs.

"Well, I never," said the woman, still watching as they left the house and walked across the street.

She had the door open before they could knock. The front porch bug light shed a gold glow on their uniforms and faces.

"Yall didn't do nothing to that bunch of heathen. I seen you," she said, shaking a finger in their faces.

"Mam. They wadn't no call to do nothing. Them's just Performing Arts and ~~Theatre~~ majors from the college over yonder. They was studying."